

The Virginia Way ain't what it used to be



Wayne Elfman and Kevin Goyette/Daily Press

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We call it The Virginia Way – but these days, it feels far from the old ideal of a group of ordinary citizens taking a brief break from private life to serve the public.

Instead, a five-month Daily Press investigation found legislators who are paid, officially, as part-timers, but who have access to tens of thousands of additional dollars a year in allowances, fringe benefits and campaign funds.

The investigation also found that as legislators balance their part-time public work with their private affairs, some see their private businesses prosper and are required to make only the most basic reports of what their private business entails.

Some get thousands of dollars a year in gifts and trips and meals.

Several landed lucrative part-time gigs as bank directors, while legislator-lawyers regularly practice before judges they elect and state agencies they fund.

Many manage multimillion-dollar flows of money through campaign war chests — for races in which they face no opponents. When they leave office, some shift to six-figure state jobs that will entitle them to big pensions.

And Virginia legislators have written themselves some of the loosest laws in the nation about the money their campaigns can accept, about the gifts lobbyists for special interests can shower on them and about the details they must share with voters about their own business interests and potential conflicts of interest.

"I hate this system. It makes us look like crooks and we're not," said Del. G. Manoli Loupassi, R- Richmond. "I make a good living, but guys who aren't as lucky, it turns 'em into beggars. ... They're looking around every night for someone to take them out to eat."

The \$10,000 threshold Virginia sets for officials to report income and investments to ensure they don't create conflicts of interests is higher than all but seven states. Virginia is one of only six states that have no limits at all on donations to political candidates.

The state's approach to ethics aims to strike a balance between letting voters know whether legislators' private business affects their decisions and the need of part-time citizen legislators to make a living outside of the General Assembly, legislators and political scientists agree.

"I'm a big proponent of having a part-time legislature," said Speaker of the House William J. Howell, R-Stafford. The benefit is legislators whose lives at work and in the community give them a better insight into the state's real needs, he said.

But he also believes it's appropriate that legislators are the only part-timers entitled to enroll in the state's unusually generous health insurance plan, and to get a state pension when they retire.

"I guess that sounds contradictory," he said.

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